Recommendations for Complaints and Reporting Policies

As part of the objectives of Unlearning Racism in Geoscience (URGE; www.urgeoscience.org), a community-wide journal-reading and policy-design curriculum to help Geoscientists unlearn racism and improve accessibility, justice, equity, and inclusion in our discipline, this deliverable seeks to provide recommendations on policies related to handling complaints as well as reports of harassment.

Dear co-chairs of the Personnel Committee (PC),

As part of the work of the Bigelow URGE pod, this letter provides feedback concerning Bigelow’s current policies and procedures for employees to file complaints or reports. The Bigelow URGE pod provides these for the PC to consider in the committee’s purview of making recommendations for updates to the Employee Handbook. The motivation for this effort was to evaluate if our current practices and policies are clear and empower all employees to feel safe and protected in the workplace, in an effort to improve accessibility, justice, equity, and inclusion. Our work was guided by questions posed in the URGE Session 2 deliverable guidelines, which we discussed as a group on 17 February 2021 after reviewing the 2021 Employee Handbook. This letter provides a summary of high-level recommendations that resulted from this exercise. If and when you would like detailed review comments, we would be happy to provide those.

We would like to stress that we do not provide these recommendations from a place of criticism, as we know and appreciate that the current and past members of the PC have put much time and talent into curating the content of the Employee Handbook, which is then also reviewed by legal counsel. Rather, we hope that our observations help save the PC time and effort in their regular review of the Employee Handbook for updates and improvements. URGE pod member Catherine Mitchell volunteers to assist the PC with the nitty-gritty drafting and evaluation of specific language for Employee Handbook updating, if desired.

Thank you for your consideration of this material.

Submitted on 1 March 2021 on behalf of the Bigelow URGE pod,
Beth Orcutt, DEI Liaison
Observations and Recommendations:

- **Observation #1:** The structure of our Employee Handbook does not lend itself to easily and quickly locating pertinent information.
  - What do we mean? For example, trying to find the relevant sections of the Employee Handbook requires scrolling back and forth to the existing table of contents to find the topical sections.
  - Why is this an issue? It does not empower an employee to quickly find information that they need to inform them of their rights, responsibilities, and mechanisms for process.
  - **Recommendation #1:** The structure of the Employee Handbook could be improved with the addition of a table of contents with linked page numbers as well as with hyperlinks to relevant policies on our shared internal Resource folder.

- **Observation #2:** There are numerous policies concerning compliant, grievance, and reporting policies, and these do not all agree with one another in terms of definitions and process.
  - What do we mean? By our count, the following table lists the sections of the Employee Handbook that touch on this subject. When comparing them to each other, there is quite a bit of overlap yet notable issues of disagreement or conflicting information given (e.g., definitions, reporting tree, spelled-out process post-report (actions and people), internal vs. external consultation resources and process, consistent confidentiality, etc.).
  - Why is this an issue? The distributed and conflicted nature of the various policies does not make it easy for an employee or supervisor to know what rights are protected, what the policy is for reporting a complaint or grievance, and what will happen if an issue is reported.
  - **Recommendation #2:** There should be a fresh look at the policies below to make sure that they are in agreement with each other (and/or streamline and consolidate, if possible) and to have them in consolidated places of the Handbook for easy access.
Observation #3: Detecting potential harassment issues before they become larger problems is not currently (clearly) part of our process.

- **What do we mean?** Some (but not all) of the above policies state that any employee, especially supervisors, **must** report any issue brought to their attention by another employee, although who the report should be brought to on their behalf is not always clear. Some of the above policies also say that reports can be made anonymously, some don’t. In no place is the role of a potential ombudsperson or internal/external resource described where an employee can solicit advice on whether to report an official complaint, or put another way, to share an issue in confidence to seek advice on what to do next.

- **Why does this matter?** Let’s imagine a scenario where in one month employee A perceives an inappropriate comment made by employee B that infringes on a policy of the institution, and in another month, employee C also hears a different unallowed disparaging remark from employee B. While offended, neither employee A or C thinks the comments that they heard were “that big of a deal”, but they also know that such things could be emblematic of deeper issues that could cause a bigger problem for someone else down the line, and that they could prevent that if they say something now. Reporting of such relatively minor offenses could allow HR, for instance, to identify a pattern of behavior in employee B so that
they can work together to remedy it, but this will only happen if employees feel supported in reporting an issue, and that doing so won’t come back to haunt them.

○ **Recommendation #3:** Our policies should be explicit about whether reporting must be done internally, what internal and/or external resources are available to help an employee decide if they should report an issue, how and if reports can be made anonymously and to whom, and what employees can expect if they report an issue.

● **Observation #4:** There is ambiguity about what policies cover visitors, students, and/or other non-employees.

  ○ **What do we mean?** Some of the above policies refer to students and non-employees, others do not. Also, there are separate Student and Postdoc Handbooks, but it is not clear to what extent the policies in each mirror each other.

  ○ **Why is this an issue?** In addition to employees, it is important for students and visitors on our campus to also feel safe and welcome. It is also important to understand the obligations of these non-employees to others that they interact with while here.

  ○ **Recommendation #4:** When revising the Employee Handbook, clarify which policies refer to visitors, students, and other non-employees, and then also double check that other handbooks are consistent with these revisions (in consultation with the Education Committee in their purview of Student and Postdoc Handbooks). Also refer and provide link(s) to the appropriate handbook(s) and vice versa.

● **Observation #5:** There is no outward-facing accountability to demonstrate our commitment to upholding our policies to make all at Bigelow feel safe and supported.

  ○ **What do we mean?** None of our policies are publicly accessible (i.e., our handbook is only accessible internally), nor is there public (internal or external) accounting of issues reported (again, in a way that protects privacy).

  ○ **Why does this matter?** For prospective employees, public access to our policies can empower them to evaluate if they will be safe and supported at our institution. For employees and students, internally-public accounting of the type of issues reported signals that the institution takes these
matters seriously. For the broader community, public accounting of types of issues acknowledges that our institution is not perfect but that we are working on addressing problems (i.e., we are walking the walk).

○ **Recommendation #5:** Consider making our Employee Handbook publicly accessible, and to the degree we are legally allowed to do so, incorporate into our reporting policies mechanisms for internally- and/or externally-facing transparency of the types of issues reported and resulting responses.